DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 180 551 JC 800 042

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TITLE Counseling Elderly Students in Community Colleges.
PUB DATE [79]
NOTE 20p.: Graduate seminar paper, University of Florida

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Counseling; *Adult Students; Community Colleges; *Counseling; Counseling Effectiveness; Counselor Role; Counselor Training; Educational Counseling; *Junior Colleges; *Literature Reviews; *Older Adults; Student Problems

ABSTRACT

Despite the growing number of older students (age 50 or over) attending two-year institutions, counseling services relevant to their needs are often overlooked. These needs are especially acute because they often stem from the disengagement of long established social roles, such as the loss of a job through retirement, the loss of loved ones through death, and the loss of self-direction through institutionalization. Students with these problems require alert counselors trained to listen attentively and to use proxemics, nonverbal communication, and object language in the counseling process. Yet surveys indicate that no special programs for counseling older students currently exist at community colleges, and research shows that there is little information about the functioning of counseling services at two-year colleges in the professional literature. Administrative action is therefore required at the college level to assure that elderly students receive psychological as well as academic counseling. When counselors provide both services, the student will feel more comfortable in discussing personal problems, because the regularly scheduled interviews incorporated into the academic process will provide for a closer relation between counselor and student. References to relevant research studies are provided throughout the document. (JP)

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ED180551

COUNSELING ELDERLY STUDENTS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

CLASS--EDH 6053
THE COMMUNITY JUNIOR COLLEGE IN AMERICA

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" IT GIVES ME GREAT PLEASURE TO CONVERSE WITH THE AGED. THEY HAVE BEEN OVER THE ROAD THAT ALL OF US MUST TRAVEL. THEY KNOW WHERE IT IS LEVEL AND WHERE IT IS ROUGH AND WHERE IT WILL LEAD."

Plato 4th Century B.C.

Historically, higher education has been concerned primarily with the young student. All School functions for adults, especially in the evening or on a part-time basis, were viewed as being peripheral to the central purpose, which they undoubtedly were. The second class status was even worse for Blacks, women and other minorities. According to Finch (1970), the myth that education takes place only in schools has made our educational system an inappropriate vehicle for the older person who may have to change life goals. To a great extent Finch is correct, but there has been some progress made in dealing woth older students in recent years, though not as much as needed, as indicated by research studies covered in this paper. Counseling services are often overlooked for evening, adult, part-time students and the growing number of older students who vacillate and make late decisions to enter a community college. The purpose of this paper is to discuss counseling services provided to older students returning to two-year institutions and difficulties encountered by both the counselor and student, status of counseling in community colleges and the counselors' role.

Recent research has shown that older American adults are entering continuing vocational, technical education programs in increasing numbers. The many advantages of the community college (proximity, low tuition, locally relevant training programs) has

given it a major role in adult education, and all community colleges are becoming aware of the necessity for these programs.

Counseling returning students 50 years and older in community colleges is, in a sense, totally different than counseling traditional students. Dubois and Wientge(1963) define the adult student as any student who is not in school full time, who carries less than a full course load, and who is generally gainfully employed or retired. Housewives who are not employed are also included in this definition. This paper will be primarily concerned with adult students fifty (50) years and older, their need for counseling, and necessary skills that counselors should possess to deal effectively with this age group.

Within the past 15 years, the United States has witnessed an extraordinary growth in the number of community, junior, and technical colleges. The number of colleges has risen from 678 in 1960, to 1,203 in 1974. Student enrollment in two year institutions of higher education has increased over 500 percent, Litwack (1977). Projections by the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges and the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education both indicate continued enrollment growth to well over four million students by 1980. What these two agencies failed to admit is that a substantially large portion of these students will be older adults. Obviously with the rise in the number of two year institutions, and an increase in the number

of older students being served, there has to be a corresponding increase in the number of qualified counselors and counseling programs to deal effectively with difficulties this age group will encounter. What are some of the difficulties these older adults will experience? What services are currently provided for them in two year institutions? What is the counselors role in dealing with difficulties faced by older students?

Students fifty years and older face many personal difficulties that require counseling, for example, low self concept, physiological, psychological and social loss. As an individual ages, vitality wanes and vulnerability increases. Youth is gone and the future, with its hopes and asperations, disappears. The senses become less acute and a decline in emotionality is evident (Atchley, 1972). According to O'Brian, Johnson and Miller (1979), the most debilitating of the losses is disengagement from a variety of social roles. The individuals job may be lost through retirement, friends and spouse through death, and self direction through institutionalization. The elderly students are more apt to experience these difficulties than traditional students because of the ties involved and the responsibilities established from long term relationships. According to O'Brian (1979) any one of these experiences can be traumatic, but for the older person the problem is complicated because the losses occur during a shorter time period. The losses are related and occur at a time in life when personal or

material support resources are less abundant. Students returning to school, perhaps not aware of the effect these losses need counseling. O'Brian (1979) feels that special attention must be given to selected aspects of counseling the aging. Among the specific helping issues to be addressed are the following: Listening--sometimes communication with the elderly is impeded by their rambling, lapses of continuity, and sudden topic shifts. Although empathic patience thus becomes a crucial part of the counselor's reply, the client needs to feel that he or she is taken seriously. When the counselor listens only half-heartedly or with obvious skepticism, barriers to a trusting relationship are erected and the helping process is short circuited; Proxemics--the most appropriate and comfortable distance between counsleor and client will vary and often depends on physical factors such as a hearing disability and the particular environment in which the interview takes place. Eye-to-eye contact is easier and interpretation of what is said is easier, especially if the client has a speech impediment: Nonverbal Communication--nonverbal communication is a vital link to older persons. Even with a hearing difficulty, older persons seem to be sensitive to a counselor's tone and inflection and able to know the personality behind the voice. Touch may also be very helpful, and many elderly persons respond more positively to such physical contact than to mere words: Object Language--the environment in which the interview takes place contains many examples of objective language. Being attentive to the complete

surroundings of the older person builds foundations that are useful at other points in the counseling relationship.

O'Brian concludes that all the items mentioned, listening to the person attentively, taking him or her seriously, using personal space for facilitating communication, and acknowledging personal possessions as springboards to conversation without disturbing the person's privacy, require alertness on the part of the counselor. By tuning into these needs and by fostering professional creativity, the counselor can enrich the lives of older clients.

The needs of older people in community colleges have too long been ranked low in importance. Ignoring their needs is no longer sound public policy in a nation whose population over sixty-five years of age will have increased from three million in 1900, to a projected twenty and eight-tenths million in the year 2000. Future counseling programs can not continue to be bound to the traditional molds of the past if they wish to be successful.

Currently no special programs for counseling elderly students within the community college setting exists. This situation probably exists because of several factors; lack of awareness of special needs of elderly students; no funding/lack of financial support; lack of administrative coordination for establishing this type of program and a lack of qualified counselors to really run the program. These barriers and many

others exist but needs of the elderly students continue to exist also.

A pilot study of 100 community colleges selected at random throughout the United States was done by Litwack (1974). According to Litwack questionnaires were sent to directors of counseling services in two year institutions, asking about the relative importance of selected counselor responsibilities and their ratings in the future. A table composed of a list of 25 counselor responsibilities indicated the present and future ranking of each individual responsibility. Gerontological counseling or counseling elderly students was not listed, therefore it was not ranked. This perhaps gives an indication of the importance of gerontological counseling in this day and age. (For information concerning the ranking of counseling responsibilities see enclosed table[1].). Another study done by Miller (1977) concerning counseling services provided by community colleges yielded basically the same results as the preceding study discussed; No special counseling services for the elderly were listed, simply because none are provided. According to Miller, each of the colleges in the survey, regardless of size, has a formal counseling service. Some of the smallest colleges offer the most diversified and comprehensive counseling programs. (For information concerning the results of Millers' study see enclosed table 2, Counseling Functions).

A growing interest in education for aging has developed in recent years. The value of education is gradually being recognized as a means of bringing about change both in the individual and in society-and change is essential if we are to adjust to the rapid and widespread advances in science and technology, Ward (1958). Socioeconomic trends have had a pronounced impact upon our citizens according to Ward, particularly the older group of our population as shown by; a decrease in the proportion of older persons in the labor force; an increased sense of their financial insecurity; and substantial growth in feelings of loneliness and frustration. I submit that it is the responsibility of the educational institutions to provide counseling services for the aged who suffer from the impact of these changing trends. Without this type of supportive service many of the elderly students will in essence "fall-by-the-way-side."

According to Hinko (1971) in a national report on the status of counseling services in large community colleges; researchers have sorely neglected the investigation of counseling services in the two year college. These institutions have been typically excluded from such studies. In general, these institutions know what the services should be but have actually done very little in terms of describing existing conditions. This fact is surprising in light of the importance attached to the counseling function in the two year college.

Litwack (1977) in the results of his study implies several things; first, those responsible for the preparation of counselors in graduate programs need to re-examine program requirements to see if they are in fact meeting the needs of the consumer--the employing two year institution. Second, a greater emphasis on the inservice upgrading of counseling skills is needed to better equip practicing counselors for the multitude of responsibilities expected of them. In his final statement, Litwack feels a re-examination of the expectations of counselors may be needed.

Early in 1977, Miller conducted a survey of counseling services offered by a select group of community colleges within the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Information was elicited about the college, its counseling service, the way the counseling service was staffed, the nature of the student population, and their counseling demands. According to Miller, there was a positive relationship between the services offered and the needs of students.

Miller is in agreement with Litwack concerning research and literature on counseling service provided by two year institutions in that despite the importance of counseling services in two-year colleges, there is not much information about their functioning in the professional literature. In their report of counseling center functions in two and four year colleges, Will and Dameron (1975) mentioned that with one exception, surveys

of college counseling have focused on four-year colleges. The one exception at that time was the work done by Hinko(1971), which was previously discussed. Miller, 1979; Glasscote and Fishman, 1973, et al feels strongly that the future of community college counseling may very well move in the direction of becoming the mental health conscious for the institutions with counselors extending the contribution made to their colleges through greater use of their professional skills and training. A stronger move in this direction will bring about a greater responsibility than perhaps counselors are aware of.

Every counselor wants to know what motivates students, what hinders this motivation at certain stages of adult life and if there are effictive ways of eliminating motivation barriers for students. Counseling is a complicated business, especially in modern civilization. One way of simplifying it is to separate it's basic elements and to let those elements continue to define the area of discourse in this study. What is needed when counseling an elderly student is caring, empathy, trust and other qualities that establish a helping relationship, coupled with listening, developing self understanding and maturity, but this is not nearly enough. Should counselors in community colleges provide more than this? What is the role of community college counselors? Counseling and guidance experts generally agree that counselor service provides the basic elements necessary for any guidance program to be necessary. The

emergence of the comprehensive community college with its wide range of educational options and diverse student population has tended to further emphasize the importance of the counseling function, Jones (1974). Most counseling done to date in most community colleges is merely academic advising. Students young and old alike quite often need more than this. There are at least two readily identifiable and important questions which must be answered in attempting to define an appropriate role for community college counselors according to Jones (1970); (1) Should counselors engage in activities which might be considered psychotherapy? (2) Should counselors spend a substantial portion of their time performing the academic advising function? It is the personal opinion of the writer that both questions should receive yes answers. The personal problems, concerns and difficultities of any student can hardly be overlooked or excluded from the personal decision-making processes if the schools expect the resultant choices to be both objectively realistic and personally satisfying. Counseling is concerned with the decision-making process and it is imperative that personal adjustments , concerns, and conflicts be dealt with in helping students resolve difficultities.

Though personal opinion is in favor of having psychotherapy in community colleges, the schools themselves must decide if this move is feasible. Individual colleges must arrive at their own decisions while taking into account such considerations as the

demonstrated needs of the student body. This definitely includes the needs of the elderly. Counselors should be used as academic advisors for several reasons: (1) the individual student will feel more comfortable in approaching a counselor for help with personal problems if he has previously had contacts of a more routine nature with the counselor; (2) the regularly scheduled interviews usually incorporated into the academic advisement process are seen as helping the student become better acquainted with his counselor and therefore less fearful in asking for counseling help; (3) Counselors are provided with useful opportunities for the identification of students who could benefit from additional counseling.

Administrators and community college leaders must look critically at present practices and patterns in currently existing counseling programs and move in bold and imaginative ways in the future to meet the increasing needs of the elderly students.

In concluding, the community college experience should provide for the elderly student the opportunity to discover and try out new ideas; to question his and others attitudes and values; to experiment with new personal, social, educational, vocational, and sexual roles; to decrease dependence on home and family; to enjoy increased competition in the academic arena; and to associate with a variety of new and different people. Higher education can and should be stimulating, stressful, and growth producing for students who experience it. The counselor, as an

educator in a community college setting on the one hand, should help the educational institution to provide those experiences which will be developmental to elderly students and, as a counselor on the other hand, should help the student to cope with the stress of being a new or returning student. Students who cope by withdrawing, by becoming passively dependent, by acting out, etc. will not derive maximum benefit from college. Counseling, remediation and referral services are primary concerns for all community colleges; teaching must be better reconciled with guidance and counseling services, with not only the traditional, but elderly students as common denominators.

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